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Gulf War Update p. 6

Media Monitor

Center for Media and Public Affairs • 2101 L Street, NW • Suite 405 • Washington, D.C. 20037 202-223-2942

Volume V Number 2 February 1991

Soviet Disunion

TV News Coverage of the USSR in 1990

How have the networks covered the struggle for political and economic change in the Soviet Union? We analyzed 1345 stories with a cumulative airtime of over 34 hours that appeared on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts during 1990.

This month's *Media Monitor* also presents the first findings on TV news coverage of the war with Iraq. Initial findings are for ABC evening newscasts from January 17 through February 8. Future *Monitors* will include the other networks as time permits.

Media Monitor (Copyright 1991) is published ten times a year by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and nonprofit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues. Yearly corporate ($50.00) and individual ($25.00) subscriptions are available.

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Major Findings:

■ **Inside Story** Three out of four stories were broadcast from within the USSR, and three out of four sources quoted were Soviet citizens. *Page 2*

■ **Goodbye Gorby, Hello Boris** Two out of three sources criticized Gorbachev's performance, while a majority praised Yeltsin. Gorbachev did better among U.S. sources than among Soviets. *Page 3*

■ **The God That Failed** Sources overwhelmingly criticized the Communist party, the Soviet government, and the Soviet economy. *Page 4*

■ **Dividing Line** Sources were split over endorsing secession movements in the Baltic states. *Page 4*

Gulf War - First Reports:

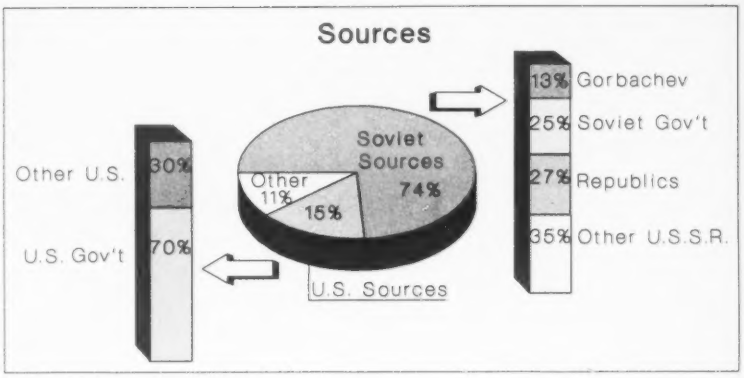
■ **Weapons Yes, War No** Sources cheered the performance of U.S. weapons and troops but jeered the war itself and U.S. policies in the Gulf. *Page 6*

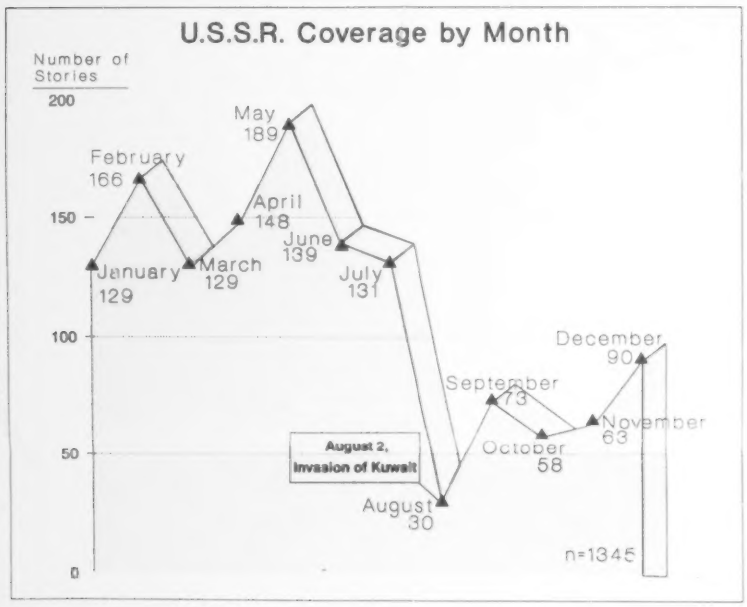
■ **Not So Pretty Pictures** TV "visuals" have shown civilian damage more frequently than aerial combat. *Page 6*

Back in the U.S.S.R.

To determine how television news has covered this time of change in the USSR, we analyzed all stories about the Soviet Union during 1990. This was TV's second biggest story of the year, after the Persian Gulf crisis. The three network evening newscasts together devoted 1345 stories, and 34 hours 8 minutes of airtime, to the USSR. CBS devoted the most airtime (11 hours 38 minutes) despite running the fewest stories (428). ABC ran 474 stories (11 hours 36 minutes) and NBC aired 443 reports (10 hours 54 minutes).

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait drastically reduced TV's interest in the Soviet Union. Cumulative USSR coverage dropped from a nightly average of five stories from January through July to one story per night in August and two per night during the last four months of 1990.





Early in the year, the news was dominated by unrest in the Soviet republics, including independence movements in the Baltics and ethnic violence in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The coverage peaked in May, when Gorbachev met with Bush in Washington. The continuing crisis in Lithuania and the election of Boris Yeltsin as President of the Russian Federation also made news. Throughout the fall the worsening economic situation made headlines, and the coverage rose in December after the resignation of Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze.

Dateline Moscow

American television tried to cover the unfolding drama in the Soviet Union through the voices of the contending forces. Nearly three out of four sources quoted (74%) were Soviet citizens. Government officials were heard most frequently, accounting for 38 percent of Soviet sources. (Mikhail Gorbachev accounted for one third of these; he was cited in 334 stories.) Americans accounted for only 15 percent of all sources, with the U.S. government responsible for seventy percent of this subset.

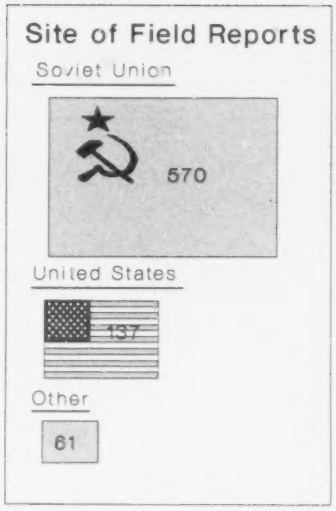
Almost three out of four field reports (570 stories) were filed from within the USSR, permitting a more internalized Soviet perspective. By contrast, only 18 percent of all field reports originated from locations in the USA. (These totals do not include 577 anchor-read "tell" stories. These brief stories served mainly to sum up the day's events.)

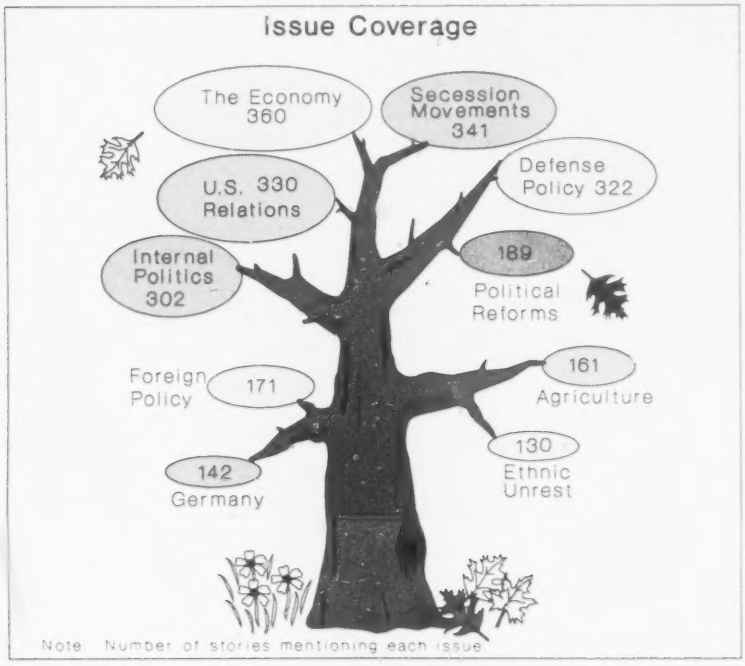
The Media Menu

The foremost news topic was the Soviet economy. The 360 economic stories focused mainly on food shortages and the conditions of average citizens. Several other topics received

heavy coverage. Secessionist movements in the republics (including the Baltics, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldavia), were mentioned in 341 stories. Superpower relations were an issue in 330 stories, led by heavy coverage of three meetings between Presidents Gorbachev and Bush.

Soviet defense policy was mentioned in 322 stories. Many of these reports dealt with the use of force to quell unrest in the republics, or the troops returning from Eastern Europe. Internal politics were an issue in 302 stories. Political maneuverings, elections, and newly open and spirited debates dominated this political reportage. Other top ten issues included political reforms, Soviet foreign policy, agriculture, relations with a reunified Germany, and ethnic unrest.





The Dustbin of History?

More than two hundred sources evaluated the performance of the Soviet government on various issues. Three out of four (74%) gave the government failing marks on everything from political reforms to agriculture policy. The political reforms implemented by Gorbachev were debated most frequently. They were criticized as insufficient by two out of three sources (68%). Boris Yeltsin typified the critics: "It's too little, too late and still not bold enough." (CBS 2/7/90) Soviet defense policy also came under fire, as four out of five (82%) sources voiced criticism. These critics focused on the use of force in the republics.

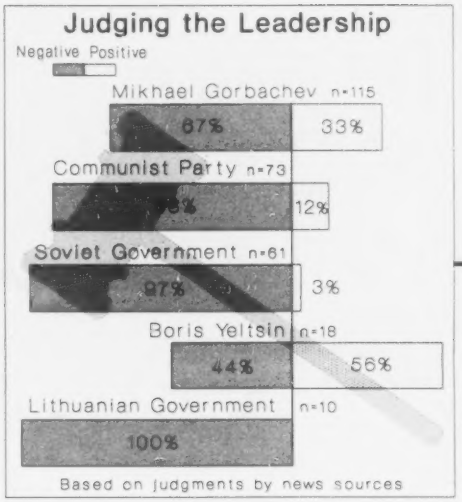
The Soviet government's dealings with Lithuania (especially the economic embargo) were also heavily criticized (80% negative). Lithuania's envoy to the U.S. told CBS (4/13), "You cannot deal with the Lithuanian people this way. You can't solve anything with paratroopers and armored cars." Other issues that elicited frequent criticism were the economy (90% negative) and agriculture policy (100% negative). Yegor Ligachev described the economic reforms as, "Five years of thoughtless radicalism and improvised swaying back and forth." (ABC 7/3/90)

Boris Da, Gorby Nyet

Previous *Media Monitor*s have always recorded mainly good press for Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1990, however, the Soviet leader was criticized by two-thirds (67%) of the 115 sources who evaluated his performance. As one Soviet citizen put it, "He's taken too many half measures, made too many compromises. He should be a more decisive figure." (ABC 1/31/90)

Gorbachev's almost three to one negative ratio of sound bites from Soviet sources differs sharply from the good press (52% positive) he received from U.S. sources. For example, CBS quoted a student at Stanford University, "He's got great ideas about the world and I admire him very much." By contrast, rising media star Boris Yeltsin attracted a majority (56%) of favorable ratings. One Soviet citizen gushed, "I voted for Mr. Gorbachev, but I would give my arms and my legs to Mr. Yeltsin." (ABC 7/3/90).

The Communist Party was treated with disdain by most sources (88% negative). For example, Yeltsin charged, "Life and the people were knocking at the party's door, but the party didn't hear. It didn't hear the tragedy taking place in this country." (NBC 7/12/90) Similarly, the Soviet government received overwhelmingly bad press (97% negative). One Lithuanian sounded a Reaganesque refrain, "The Soviet Union is super evil. We must decolonize this last empire." (CBS 2/5/90)



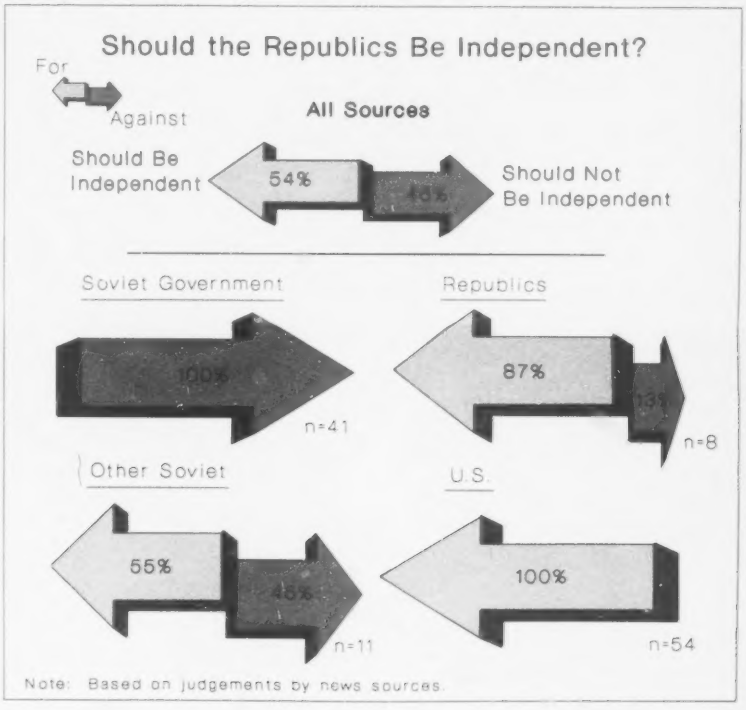
Finally, Soviet sources were the only ones to render judgments of the Lithuanian government, and they were unanimous in their disapproval. A Soviet journalist remarked, "Lithuanian nationalists ... have lost their sense of reality and responsibility." (ABC 4/15/90)

Let Your People Go

The issue debate was most heated on the fate of the republics. The 114 sources who addressed this issue sided narrowly with the freedom movements: 54 percent favored independence and 46 percent opposed it. This debate was highly polarized, as Soviet government sources argued unanimously against freedom for the republics. "The road to independence is ruinous and will only lead to a dead end." (Gorbachev, ABC, 3/30/90) Other Soviet sources were closely divided (55% for vs. 45% against). By contrast, U.S. sources were unanimous in advocating independence. Finally, sources from the republics themselves overwhelmingly favored independence (87% to 13%). For example, one Estonian declared, "I think the Lithuanians are correct. They want independence and they should have it." (ABC 3/31/90)

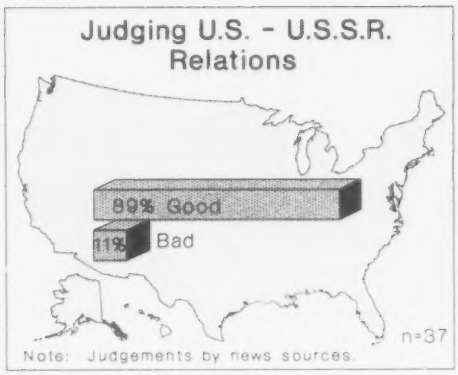
Russian Bears

The state of the Soviet economy was discussed by more than a hundred sources during 1990. Every one of these sources declared that the economy was in dire shape. As one citizen put it, "Look how we live! The stores are empty, the farms don't work. They should have given the land back to us farmers long ago." (CBS 2/7/90) As the economic crisis heated up in the latter part of the year, assessments of the economy in-



Note: Judgements of news sources

creased. Nearly half of the evaluations were broadcast in the final four months, as an inefficient transportation system and the onset of winter worsened food shortages. CBS Moscow correspondent Barry Petersen reported, "...production has fallen off so much the economy is actually shrinking. The Soviets today called the situation a catastrophe, a nightmare." (9/17/90)



Note: Judgements by news sources

No More Cold War

As the curtain went down on the Cold War, U.S.-Soviet relations remained a major focus of media attention. In contrast to the downbeat tone of Soviet domestic news, sources overwhelmingly (by 89% to 11%) portrayed the superpower relationship as healthy. Most of these upbeat assessments come from Soviet or U.S. government officials. Gorbachev even asserted, "Today the Soviet Union and the U.S. no longer act as adversaries, but as partaers." (NBC 11/19/90)

Future Shocks

Current problems competed for airtime with speculation about the future. We recorded 167 predictions about the future of the Baltics, the continuing political and economic reforms, the use of the military to quell independence movements, and the prospects for Gorbachev's presidency.

The scenario most frequently discussed was the secession of the Baltic Republics. Nine out of ten sources (91%) predicted that these tiny non-Russian countries would eventually be free. One year before the Soviet military crackdown, one Lithuanian predicted hopefully, "We will be as independent as Hungary or Czechoslovakia in a few years. Someday we'll be free as America." (CBS 1/10/90) The continuation of the economic reform efforts, designed to set the Soviet economy on the road to efficiency, was affirmed by most sources (69%), as was continued political reform (65%).

Although Gorbachev was widely criticized, the majority of sources felt he would not share the same fate as Nikita Khrushchev. Sixty-two percent of sources rejected the prospect that he might be ousted.

Finally, the likelihood of military involvement in the republics was rejected by two out of three sources. One Soviet foreign affairs expert said, "This country is not going to repeat the kind of approach to human life that existed under Stalin." (CBS 3/20/90)

What Will Happen?

	Yes	No
Baltic States Will Secede n=23	91%	9%
Political Reforms Will Continue n=23	65%	35%
Military Will Subdue the Republics n=15	33%	67%
Gorbachev Will Be Ousted n=13	38%	62%
Economical Reforms Will Continue n=13	69%	31%

Note Predictions by news sources

Television News Coverage of the Persian Gulf War

War news dominated the airwaves after the U.S. attack on Iraq began January 16. From January 17 through February 8, there were 338 war stories on ABC's "World News Tonight," the highest-rated evening news program. The war averaged nearly 15 stories per night, for a total airtime of 10 hours 6 minutes, or about 26 minutes per night. (Future *Monitors* will include the other networks, as well as prime time war news.)

Rating the Players

Nearly all (97%) of the 74 sources who evaluated the American military gave it high marks for its performance in the Gulf War. Although the U.S. Air Force and the Patriot missile received the most attention, praise was evenly split between weapons systems and troops. Typical was the comment from ABC analyst Anthony Cordesman, who noted that the U.S. had "achieved an astounding success in the air." (1/30) The Iraqi military also received mainly positive ratings from news sources, especially from U.S. defense officials.

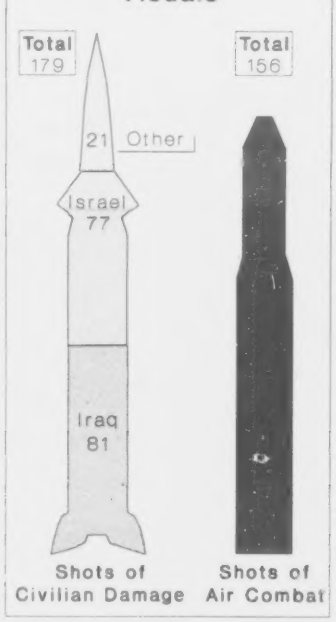
Rave reviews of the military were the exception, not the rule, in coverage of the U.S. government. In fact, America's policies have gotten almost as bad press as Iraq's. Nearly three out of four sources (72%) criticized the U.S., especially for damage caused to civilian sites in Iraq. A majority of the critics were foreign, especially Iraqis and Jordanians. This compares to 77 percent of sources who criticized the Iraqi government for its actions, notably its Scud attacks on Israel and the release of oil into the Persian Gulf. However, President Bush personally fared better than his Iraqi counterpart. Eighty-six percent of sources criticized Saddam, including one Colorado grade-schooler who said that "people like Saddam Hussein should be dragged out into the street and shot." (1/23)

Rating the Players

	Percent Positive	Number of Sources
U.S. Government	28%	32
Iraqi Government	23%	22
U.S. Military	97%	74
Iraqi Military	58%	43
George Bush	57%	7
Saddam Hussein	14%	14

Source: ABC World News Tonight, 1/17 - 2/8

Visuals



War and Peace

Even as media attention turned to the fighting in the Gulf, the domestic debate over the war continued. Since the conflict began, two out of every three sources (67%) have opposed the decision to go to war; nearly half of these sources were demonstrators or members of anti-war groups. For example, one protester condemned the "needless, unnecessary war against Iraq." (1/19) Even among non-activists, though, opposition outweighed support by 52 percent to 43 percent.

Stories about the anti-war movement aired 13 times, compared to 4 stories on pro-war demonstrations. By contrast, a *Times Mirror* poll released January 31 found that 9 percent of Americans had attended pro-war rallies and 3 percent anti-war rallies. Thus, these media images of public opinion are out of synch with polling data.

Combat and Casualties

Despite the novelty of bombs-eye-views of the air war, ABC's coverage has featured more pictures of civilian damage (179) than of aerial combat (156). Most of the combat visuals shown have been shots taken by Allied planes while on their missions, or of Patriot missiles intercepting Scuds over Israel and Saudi Arabia. The pictures of civilian damage included 32 shots of human casualties and 147 pictures of damaged structures. Israeli casualties were the most visible; 18 of the 77 Israeli shots of civilian damage (23%) showed civilian casualties. In contrast, casualties were shown in 14 of the 81 visuals of Iraqi civilian damage (or 17%).